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Student Research Indicates Need for Greater Awareness, More Effective Intervention to Reduce Courtship Violence

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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

In the Spotlight

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Student Research Indicates Need for Greater Awareness, More Effective Intervention to Reduce Courtship Violence

ORONO, Maine -- The latest dating violence survey of a small random sampling of UMaine undergraduates indicates no significant decline in courtship acts of violence over the past 15 years, despite heightened public awareness and prevention programs on the UMaine campus and throughout society. The study is conducted on a five-year basis by students in Professor Robert Milardo's Research Methods in Child Development and Family Relations course. The information is revealing and consistent with national data of dating violence among college undergraduates, according to research project coordinators Wendy Weise and Alisa Meggison, graduate students in the College of Education & Human Development.

Results indicate that 21 percent (approximately one in five) of the 76 UMaine students responding to the survey, both males and females, have engaged in one or more abusive acts with a dating partner. Anger was the most prevalent reason given, followed by love for a partner as the impetus for violence.

The study coordinators see the research, conducted this spring, as being particularly timely and instructive. The UMaine Center for Students and Community Life is spearheading a series of highly visual activities during the week of September 22 to launch its year-long educational programming efforts to help students understand the dynamics of dating violence and of positive personal relationships. In addition, October is national Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

"UMaine has a lot of sound, forward-thinking programming and demonstrates national leadership and social responsibility in dealing with these difficult problems," says Milardo, who initiated the dating violence study in 1982 to teach research by having students conduct a meaningful study that would be of value to the campus community.

In addition to the project coordinators, 11 other students in the class participated in the study. They worked in teams responsible for essential areas of the research process, including literature review, instrument development, sampling and data collection, and data analysis.

Their study examined three questions: What types of violence are occurring in dating relations? How prevalent is dating violence in relationships among college students? Are there gender differences in the reported rates of dating violence?

A total of 200 surveys were distributed to randomly selected UMaine students, representing a broad spectrum of the campus population. Seventy-six students -- 31 males and 45 females -- completed and returned the questionnaire, providing information about current and previous dating relationships. The majority of the responding females

were 22 or younger and the majority of the males were between 20-25. The majority of both males and females responding lived off-campus and most reported being in exclusive dating relationships with one person. However, about one-third of the females indicated they were not dating at the time.

The survey listed eight categories of violence and asked students if they now or had ever used any of these types of violence against their partner (current or previous) in trying to resolve an issue. Results reflected that 13 percent of the total sample (males and females) had threatened to hit or throw something; 10 percent had actually thrown something at a partner; 13 percent had pushed/grabbed or shoved a partner; 9 percent had slapped a partner; 5 percent had kicked, bit or hit a partner; 4 percent had beat up a partner; and 1 percent had threatened a partner with a knife or gun.

Only one method of violence, "choked my partner," had not been used by any of the students completing the survey. Although men were more aggressive and used more types of forcible violence than women, the gender difference was insignificant, according to the researchers.

The 21 percent rate of violence is essentially unchanged from 1992, the last year of the class research project, and it parallels rates reported in national samples that range between 15-20 percent using similar measures, according to Weise and Meggison.

It is not clear whether any of the reported episodes were the result of self-defense, retaliation or an individual act of violence. However, respondents did shed some insight on the meaning of their actions. Fifty-nine percent said they were angry with their partner at the time of the violent act. Fifteen percent attributed the violence to "love," compared to only 5 percent who said their behavior meant they hated their partner. In addition, 12 percent said their action meant they were confused, and 9 percent said they were scared.

Sex was the most frequent issue igniting violence. Twenty percent of students responding to the survey said the conflict concerned sex, followed by money (11 percent); cheating and flirting (9 percent); drug and alcohol abuse (3 percent); and misunderstandings (3 percent).

Weise contents the confusion between love and violence stems from parents and caregivers itting children under the pretext of love and concern. "It sends a conflicting message that continues to play out in adult relationships," she says.

"The key issue is to get people to understand the danger of using love as an excuse," says Meggison. "People need to look at how they deal with differences."

The fact is that both men and women, and a significant minority of UMaine students are participating in serious types of violence that are likely to cause injury, according to Milardo. "It's a direction that hasn't changed in 15 years," he says.

The class project also helps pave the way for further investigation into dating violence among undergraduate college students, say Weise and Meggison. They hope the study stimulates future research with two primary goals in mind: examining interventions and determining what kind of public awareness and education might be more effective in curbing courtship violence; and teaching people effective conflict management skills to prevent all forms and incidents of relationship violence.

Robert Dana, associate dean of the UMaine Center for Students and Community Life, says that this type of exploratory student research helps inform the campus community's

discussion regarding relationship issues. "UMaine is concerned about dating and relationship concerns from rape and sexual assault to miscommunications, and this survey sample gives us another set of important information for our proactive and responsive programming," he says.

Other UMaine students participating in the research project were: Stephanie Stoney, Toni Moleon, Niki Vaughan, Nancy Barnes, Kandi Grant, Sean Weber, Mary Ann Combs, Jessica Henderson, Jeni Crilly, Tracy Pieschke and Sue Russell.

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